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The Lab Report, volume 02, issue 09

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Playwright's Lab
at Hollins University

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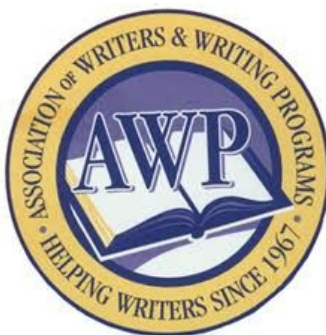


The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Volume 02, Issue 09 (February, 2009)

Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Conference



The Association of Writers and Writing Programs holds their annual conference in a major city in a different region each year. This year the conference was held in Chicago and marked the first time that the conference featured panels on playwriting.

Playwright Lisa Schlesinger, who teaches playwriting at Columbia College in Chicago, organized the panel *Pass it On: Cultivating the Art and Craft of Playwriting*. She invited some of her favorite writers and teachers to participate, including Todd Ristau

(Playwright's Lab Program Director), Ruth Margraff (playwright and instructor at the School of the Institute of Art in Chicago and Lab guest artist), Art Borrecca (dramaturg and Chair of the Iowa Playwright's Workshop), and Ken Prestininzi (playwright and Associate Chair of Playwriting at the Yale School of Drama).

Schlesinger said, "After years of teaching and now coordinating a playwriting program, I find myself trying to communicate ways of teaching playwriting to other teachers. The plays I love best are the ones that surprise and delight me. Sometimes they have elements described in those books on how to write a play but often they just don't. Can one teach the craft and tricks of the trade, as well as encourage total abandonment of the rules? How do we adjust our teaching to embrace new ideas, visions, political realities? And how do we encourage young



writers to reach and write beyond what they know?"

The panelists discussed how and why they became playwrights or dramaturgs and teachers of playwriting. Topics included methods of instruction, approaches to structure, and how to inspire other teachers so that they can inspire their students in turn.

Attendance was standing room only with a lengthy Q&A, indicating tremendous interest in this kind of creative writing.

www.awpwriter.org/conference

National Conference of Playwriting Programs held at Fordham



Matthew Maguire is a multi-disciplinary OBIE winning theatre artist with numerous fellowships and commissions as a playwright who is also the Director of the Theatre Program at Fordham College at Lincoln Center in New York. He was

scheduled to participate in the AWP panel in Chicago, but when he was unable to attend, Matthew offered to host a national gathering of playwriting program directors at Fordham.

The call went out and the response was overwhelming, with participants coming to New York from all over the country.

Participants included **Lisa Schlesinger** (Columbia College), **Todd Ristau** (Hollins), **Mac Wellman** (Brooklyn College), **Suzan Zeder** (UT Austin), **Daniel Alexander Jones** (Fordham), **Len Jenkin** (NYU/Tisch), **Martin Kettling** (The Oneill), **Megan Monaghan** (LARK Theatre), **Morgan**

Jenness (Fordham), **Ken Prestininzi** (Yale), **Elaine Avila** (UNM), **Erik Ehn** and **Carl Hancock Rux** (CalArts), and **Kenley Smith** (Studio Roanoke). Participating in the follow-up email discussion were **Charles Mee**, **May Adrales** (Public Theatre), **Andy Snyder**, **Joel Ruark** (New Dramatists), **Eva Patton** (Fordham), and **Art Borrecca** (Iowa).

The group spent the day talking about passing on the art of playwriting as well as the difficulties facing playwriting MFA programs. They brainstormed on working together, creating options for graduates, sharing resources and solving problems in a spirit of cooperation, not competition. Everyone emerged refreshed and enthusiastic about making the summit an annual event.

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Jayne Benjulian Named Resident Dramaturg at the Magic Theatre



Jayne Benjulian joined us as an MFA candidate in the summer of 2008. She's taking advantage of the flexibility afforded by the Playwright's Lab to take time off from her academic studies with us to pursue an amazing professional opportunity working with San Francisco's Magic Theatre.

The Magic Theatre was founded by John Lion in 1967 and is based at the historic Mason Center and has become one of the most prominent theatre companies in the US dedicated solely to the development and production of new plays.

Jayne's involvement with the Magic began as a volunteer before she came to Hollins. She had submitted her play *PVS* to the Sloan Initiative and was a finalist. Afterwards the Director of New Play Development, Marc Routhier, asked her to serve on the Literary Committee where she read plays, wrote critiques and met every two weeks with the other members.

After that first summer, her work with the theatre deepened in scope and responsibility, and has contributed to her education as

a playwright and built significantly on the coursework in Dramaturgy class she took at Hollins with Lenora Inez Brown.

"I began as Dramaturgy Apprentice, in the winter advanced to Dramaturg, and shortly thereafter to Resident Dramaturg," Jayne wrote us about the recent steps on her career path and the break in her studies. "I am painfully aware of the days that have gone by since my first summer at Hollins, and of the fact that the work that kept me buoyant and gave my life purpose went into deep freeze...on the other hand, I had so much to learn about the practice of theater when I began Hollins—my background having been literary study and my experience writing plays limited—that seizing the opportunity to live and breathe practical theater with world-class professionals was a decision from which I could not walk away."

Last December, newly appointed Artistic Director Loretta Greco announced that the Magic Theatre was verging on closing its doors. He said that unless \$350,000 were raised, in just a matter of weeks, the season would be cancelled and the doors would shut for good. The national appeal for funds was successful, and the theatre is planning to continue the season and kept the doors open.

The financial difficulties did result in drastic changes, however, and many staff positions were eliminated, increasing the importance of volunteers. Jayne was asked to fill in as marketing strategist, adding a new area to her expanding portfolio of expertise.

"Working on the ground in a

theater has given me the opportunity to see what it's like to be a playwright working in development on a new play with directors, actors and a dramaturg. I've been able to observe how the process really works and understand how plays—not scripts—are actually developed and how the collaboration works or doesn't," Jayne told us.

It is hard to imagine a more beneficial learning opportunity than the one Jayne is immersed in at the Magic, or a theatre better suited to provide that experience.

Working in the Literary Department, Jayne has been working to solicit scripts from playwrights and agents. She sorts and prioritizes the flood of submissions and decides which ones to read first, managing the flow of scripts through the entire consideration process. She writes critiques and helps determine which deserve second and third readings. She now manages and helps recruit members for the Literary Committee and then is the point of contact for communication between the theatre and agents representing writers.

"From a playwright's point of view, this work has been daunting," Benjulian said. "Rejecting other writers is not fun. Rejecting playwrights with big reputations isn't fun either. Writing a note that encourages someone who's working hard is fun when you know it's made a difference. Telling an agent you can't produce a play even though you love it because it's been done at eight other theaters and that just isn't your mission is hard. But I've met some awesome agents—people I hope will read my work when I'm ready."

Jayne has been working with the National New Play Development

Network to commission new work and collaborate on co-productions and collaborations with other theaters. She's attended play development conferences, readings and performances looking for playwrights, actors and directors who might be good matches for future collaborations with the Magic.

Jayne has been working closely with the new Artistic Director to help choose work for the next season that deepens the mission of the theater and acknowledges the fierce economic climate

As Resident Dramaturg she will be responsible for conferring with playwrights and directors before the rehearsal process to gain an understanding of what kind of guidance the playwright is looking for and how the director might use another ear in rehearsal. She will be researching the world of the play and present textual, visual and aural material to enrich that world for the actors and create packets for the actors which explore words, ideas and context of the play with which every actor may not be familiar. She will be there in the first days of rehearsal to observe and foster conversations among the collaborators, observe stumble-throughs, run-throughs and rehearsals, providing notes for the director and playwright on questions that emerge. She also helps the playwright frame rewrite possibilities.

She will aid audience understanding by coaching docents, leading talk backs, preparing program notes and edit interviews with each playwright.



www.magictheatre.org

Save AboutFace Theatre



t h e a t r e

About Face Theatre is one of Chicago's most acclaimed theatre companies, and is a national leader in the development of new work exploring gender and sexual identity. Since its founding by Kyle Hall and Eric Rosen in 1995, the company has premiered more than 30 new plays by writers and directors who have been recognized with several Tony Awards, The Pulitzer Prize for Drama, The MacArthur Fellowship and dozens of Joseph Jefferson Awards.

In addition to its award-winning main stage performances, About Face is known nationally for its ground-breaking Youth

Theatre, which creates critically acclaimed new work by and about LGBTQ youth and their allies. The Youth Theatre has performed on major stages across the country, and, through its outreach tour, changes the lives of thousands of young people each year. Building on the success of the youth theatre model, About Face recently launched its corporate outreach program to provide diversity training and onsite workshops to the corporate community.

Bonnie Metzgar, recently named as its new Artistic Director, was a guest artist at Hollins this past summer and will be returning to Hollins as a regular visiting faculty member.

One of the most pressing difficulties facing Metzgar after taking the reins of the company was addressing the existing debt, declining ticket sales and a critical need to establish a baseline of cash credit to fund day-to-day business operations.

This month, she made the jaw-dropping announcement that the situation had become so critical that they have launched a massive \$300,000 emergency fund raising campaign. Without half that amount raised by March 15, the theatre will be forced to close its doors.

"FACE THE FUTURE" is a campaign to save the About Face and ensure its future. Their Board of Directors is asking for immediate financial contributions in order to keep the doors open, staff paid, and the youth theatre program intact.

About Face Theatre creates exceptional, innovative and adventurous plays to advance the national dialogue on gender and sexual identity. If About Face does not survive, the country will lose one of the few high-profile theaters making new work by and about the LGBTQ experience. The award-winning About Face Youth Theater serves queer youth by providing artistic experiences and leadership training.

About Face has reduced its budget by over 30%, implementing staff and production cuts, and postponing the currently scheduled production *What Once We Felt* by Ann Marie Healy until the theatre budget is stabilized.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

A major component of the Face the Future campaign is using social media. For example, there is a Facebook group page dedicated to the effort and the theatre is encouraging all interested parties to draft letters of support to circulate via email.

About Face has organized a web-

based video forum for testimonials on the importance of About Face Theatre, of mentoring queer youth, and the vital need for innovative artmaking in today's society. Many of these videos have gone viral via YouTube as artists, audiences, and arts administrators around the country voice their support for About Face in this crisis.

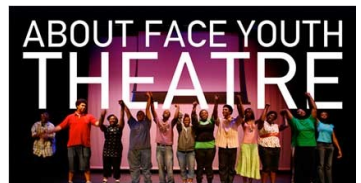
To participate, please email dav@aboutfacetheatre.com or call 773-784-8565.

You can also track progress and contribute comments to the "Face the Future" blog.

Donations can be made via the theatre's website, by calling (773)784-8565, or by mailing a check to:

About Face Theatre
1222 W. Wilson, 2nd Floor West
Chicago, IL
60640.

About Face Theatre is a 501c3 organization and all donations are fully tax deductible.



www.aboutfacetheatre.com

No Shame Moves to Hollins Campus



No Shame Theatre, the anything-goes performance venue, will be moving to the upstairs studio

space in the Hollins Little Theatre. The move was prompted by the recent closing of Mill Mountain theatre.

No Shame came to Roanoke in 2003 and has been presented on MMT's Waldron Stage every Friday night at 11PM. The temporary hosting at Hollins will allow it to continue the weekly performances without interruption until No Shame moves to its new (and hopefully permanent) home at Studio

Roanoke in April.

The performance time will be moved to 10PM, however, but everything else (including the \$5 ticket price) will stay exactly the same.

The event will be staffed by Hollins undergraduate theatre students and all proceeds while Hollins hosts No Shame will be placed in the New Works Initiative, a fund dedicated to providing funding for producing plays associated with

the Playwright's Lab.



www.noshame.org

Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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For application materials, please call (540) 362-6326 or visit on the web at www.hollins.edu/grad/playwriting for more information.

Check out our MySpace page!
www.myspace.com/hollinsplaywrightslab

From the Director: Resume and Official Transcripts

I've been spending some time in the last few issues talking about the elements you'll need to include in your application package to our MFA program.

The need for official transcripts is obvious. We need demonstrable proof that you have obtained your undergraduate degree.

Are we going to look at your grades? Yes. Will we reject you if your undergraduate grades are terrible? Not necessarily, but we do use past performance as an indicator in determining if you are up to meeting the demands of graduate level study. A lot of people who do extremely well in graduate school have undergraduate grades they might be less than proud of. Don't try to hide them,

though. Address them in your letter of interest and speak to both your desire to make a stronger showing in grad school and some of your strategies for doing so.

Don't obsess about it, though. The quality of your writing sample, strength of your letter of interest, and the enthusiasm of your references will likely outweigh that D- you got in calculus.

Often I hear people stressing over their resume or CV and even about what the difference between a CV and a resume is, and which one is appropriate, how long should it be, and how much not having a bunch of professional credits on it matters.

To all that, I can only say, "Relax."

A resume is geared more toward employment and a CV (Curriculum Vitae) is geared more toward academic achievements, so a CV is probably more appropriate. There are lots of good examples online on how to craft a good one.

As for credits, we don't want you to prove you don't need the instruction in order to get into the program. What we want is an accurate idea of your background, where you've worked and what you've done and who you've done it with.

Be truthful. Be complete. Be concise.



Todd Ristau, Director